

American and Israeli Jews Are Out of Sync: Mind the Gap to Bridge the Gap



In 2013, clinical psychologist Susan Silk and her husband Barry Goldman publicized their Ring Theory, a model for how to relate to ourselves and others in times of crisis. The theory proposes thinking in terms of concentric rings or circles: The most directly affected are in the center, and those gradually less affected sit in outer rings.

Silk and Goldman offer concrete advice. Those situated within the inner rings, the theory says, can complain about their hardship to those in the outer rings, who in turn should offer support. "You can say whatever you want as long as you're talking to someone in a larger ring." The goal is 'Comfort IN, Dump OUT.'

I have been thinking a lot about the Ring Theory recently, especially after reading Dr. Erica Brown's eloquent essay about being a Jew in the Diaspora today. She describes Jews in America as feeling deeply connected to and invested in events transpiring here in Israel, yet with a sense that they are still somehow out of sync with Israeli Jews. In terms of the Ring Theory, Dr. Brown might be articulating how it feels to sit in a circle farther from the center of a crisis, and the challenge of feeling that your heart is in the East when you physically reside in the West.

As Dr. Brown wisely observes, this challenge can feel true, even for Jews within Israel if we more carefully define each ring. Parents of soldiers with desk jobs do not share the same degree of worry as the parents of combat soldiers. Most Israelis do not experience the paralyzing angst and agony of the hostage families. And though nearly everyone in this country knows someone who was murdered or killed in battle, the vast majority of Israelis have not personally sat shiva during this war.

Furthermore, there are connections that transcend geography. Some parents of lone soldiers or relatives of hostages occupy the innermost rings of this crisis while living outside of Israel.

The imagery of a circle with concentric rings helps frame the complex emotional realities that Jews in Israel and across the world have been navigating since October 7. The Ring Theory can enable us to locate ourselves on the diagram—or on multiple diagrams—and to understand why we may be feeling out of sync with Jews in other communities.

‘No way to gloss over the space between us’

When I moved from America to Israel in 2011, the time difference didn’t make me a different person. While I could no longer touch and hug those I had grown up with, I did not feel that the physical distance meant we were out of touch with each other’s lives. The shared values that bound me to my friends and family were stronger than any ocean separating us.

Yet over the last 16 months, something seems to have changed. I feel a new, growing sadness about the distance between Jews in Israel and Jews abroad. Several rings separate me from the center of pain of American Jews. And so, too, several rings separate them from mine.

This is the case even though the pain and sense of connection that Jews abroad have been experiencing since October 7 is intense, even though Jews worldwide care deeply about the vision and mission of the State of Israel, and even though Israelis are extremely grateful for the heartfelt prayers, the generous financial contributions, the solidarity trips, and the wide array of physical and emotional support that Jews in the Diaspora offer. This distance is felt even with Jews in the Diaspora who want to be in Israel and are moving in that direction.

In the year-and-a-half since that fateful Simchat Torah, American Jews (as well as Jews across the world) face daily anxieties that I can’t fully relate to. I have not experienced antisemitism on the streets of my own community, nor internal tensions and growing discomfort in the places where I once felt at ease. I am not worrying about which institutions will accept my kids nor wondering if they can expect a future of successful careers and integration in their country of birth.

And for that same year-and-a-half, Israelis have become more aware than ever of what it means to be on the front lines. They are in the center of a major crisis as they struggle to hold up the country and guarantee its long-term survival—on behalf of all Jews everywhere. They are doing so by living here, building homes, settling land, raising children, growing communities, working hard in their careers, fighting in the army, putting their lives on the line, and tragically dying in order to protect and ensure the future of the Jewish People. They are doing so by simply getting up in the morning.

Right now we are unable to fully share each other’s experiences. That is the tough but true reality of living in such different circumstances. There is no quick fix solution or easy way to gloss over the

space between us. Each community is at the epicenter of its own real crisis and on the outer rings of the other's.

Despite the extraordinary efforts to keep Israel on their hearts and minds from afar, we cannot escape the fact that we are in different rings. This is not a statement of judgment, nor an indication of a lack of empathy. It is simply the truth. And it does hurt.

There are moments when we Israelis feel this gap especially acutely.

When pictures from Father's Day football games and barbecues flood a family WhatsApp group on the same day Israeli families buried their own fathers, Israelis feel the gap. When a friend confides that, in her community, people are no longer singularly focused on Israel, Israelis feel the gap. When young adults in America are afraid of being harassed on campus while young adults in Israel are afraid of being killed by terrorists, Israelis feel the gap.

There is a specific kind of pain that we experience when we feel distant from those who are closest to us, those we love. It is the pain we feel when a spouse doesn't truly get our needs, when a parent cannot fully appreciate our concerns, or when a sibling struggles to identify with our emotions. The gap might have nothing to do with how much they actually care, and the distance might be no more than an expression of the existential loneliness we sometimes feel as humans. And it still hurts.

This is the pain that many Jews both in and out of Israel have been feeling these past many months. I believe this disconnect is paradoxically a testament to the closeness of our bonds—as one doesn't feel disappointed by, distant from, or frustrated with those from whom one has no expectations. Still, it is a painful reality to come to terms with, because when you are going through something transformative and those closest to you cannot fully relate, it makes you feel further apart than you want to be, farther apart than you perhaps actually are.

Acknowledging the Distance Can Help Bridge the Gap

As connected as all Jews are to their brethren around the world, we are experiencing life differently at this moment. That truth can be hard for all of us to absorb because we so badly want to understand each other. Being part of Klal Yisrael means that when Israel is in trouble or Jews anywhere in the world are reeling, we all feel it. All Jews are guarantors for one another, the Talmud says. Jews take responsibility for each other. When you are in pain, I am in pain, too.

At the same time, acknowledging the simple truth that we are in different rings of pain can help us feel more seen and heard by one another. Clearly recognizing that we are going through different experiences can open the door for more honest, open, and genuine exchanges. Recognition of the differences gives all parties more space to share. No one needs to prove that they fully "get" the other; we can all show up as we are.

The Ring Theory allows us to appropriately adjust our expectations for one another. When we are in the center of a crisis, we don't have the emotional capacity to be comforting and supportive to those looking in from the outer rings. We can be fully aware that they also feel pain, even as we are not able to address or respond to their feelings right now.

People closer to the center are holding too much. They are just trying to get by. They don't deny the pain felt by others, but they are often not capable of helping them bear it.

I cannot truly understand the current experience of my students, colleagues, friends, and family in America. And I can't expect them to fully absorb mine, even while I can try my best to describe it.

Acknowledging, however, that the crises of this war might be experienced differently by Jews in Israel and Jews in the Diaspora does not invalidate or dismiss any of this. It does not make the pain felt by those living abroad or our communities' love for each other any less real. On the contrary, understanding, accepting, and embracing the physical and emotional reality— wrenching as this reality may be—that we sometimes find ourselves in the center of some rings and on the outer edges of others can help foster more open, authentic, and empathetic dialogue that can result in deeper forms of genuine unity.

Acknowledging the distance, however painful, may allow us to bridge the gaps, even when we cannot erase them.

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